DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 322 514 CS 212 464

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TITLE Opening Spaces for Confrontive Encounters with Literature.
PUB DATE Apr 90
NOTE 17p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the College English Association (Buffalo, NY, April 5-7, 1990).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Guides - Classroom Use - Guides (For Teachers) (052)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Consciousness Raising; *Dialog Journals; Discourse Modes; *Discussion (Teaching Technique); *Females; Higher Education; *Literary Criticism; Literature Appreciation; *Social Discrimination; Student Reaction; Teaching Models
IDENTIFIERS *Dialogics; Empowerment; Response Learning; Womens Literature

ABSTRACT

A literature class can be successfully taught and organized around content that confronts oppressions (subtle, moral and intellectual forms of discrimination) and empowers students to critique their conceived worlds which are often at odds with their perceived realities. First, selected writings for examination illuminate life in a resistant world while authors show their deliberate, conscious pursuit of freedom. Examples of such works include Kate Chopin's "The Awakening," Edith Wharton's "The House of Mirth," Toni Morrison's "Beloved," Virginia Woolf's "To the Lighthouse," and Doris Lessing's "The Fifth Child." The content of these works opens spaces or creates interruptions in what is often taken as a given. Next, these confrontive writings are used as an invitation to dialogue as students focus upon changing oppressive social structures that influence their own lives. Students are moved to this point by the use of response journals and learning logs in which they have a place to think through their reading, empowering their voices. Students and the teacher are authorities who learn together by reflecting and questioning and who create together an authentic curriculum through response and discussion. (Twenty-two references are attached.) (KEH)

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Opening Spaces for Confrontive Encounters with Literature[1]

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Introduction

Leaving behind what seems to have been the apathetic eighties, the challenge of the nineties is to help our students find what the philospher, Alfred Schutz, calls "wide-awakeness." Schutz defines wide-awakeness as "a plane of consciousness of highest tension originating in an attitude of full attention to life and its requirements" (213). Such a plane requires a pedagogy which excites imaginations and denies practice that undermines human potential. It requires a "pedagogy of possibility" as Roger Simon proposes, a pedagogy that will not limit what Dewey calls "occasions, stimuli, and opportunities for continuing growth in new directions" (36) but which opens spaces for critical dialogue. Maxine Greene considers this dialogue social inquiry which reflects upon life situations and necessitates a "knowing that becomes an opening onto what has not yet been" (122). Further, opening spaces here refers to "openings," according to Bakhtin, that provide liberatory breaks or interruptions in the social order.

Thus, in this essay I argue for openings which interrupt the traditional order of teaching with content that confronts oppressions. Oppression is used here to represent the more subtle, moral and intellectual forms of discrimination and abuse reflected in dominant class interests, what Antonio Gramsci calls

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"hegemony" or hegemonic direction. In form, then, this pedagogy is dialogical. It is situated in the desire to help students make problematic through social critique their constructed, conceived worlds which are often at odds with their perceived or desired realities. Content explores the possible ways in which literature that both illuminates experience and reconstructs the world through Schutz' notion of "the ready-made standardized scheme of cultural patterns handed down" (1964, 22) calls a reader to reflection as it interrupts the social order, especially along class, race, and gender lines. In *Landscapes of Learning*, Maxine Greene suggests that "teachers can release people for this kind of seeing..." by working intentionally to "confront with new ideas the factors that close off opportunities" (186).

Dialogue as Curriculum

Such intentional work is often defined as teacher work. And, teaching, in any case, is a political project because it cannot escape ideology. Further, when in the Bakhtinean sense of "dialogics" not one privileged voice but multiple voices create and transform the curriculum, that teaching is dialogical. Through this approach my students teach me and each other as much as I teach them. For example, in my previous women and minorities course, though I had 45 students, I insisted upon sitting in a circle in addition to using small groups to facilitate discussion. (One problem in using the circle with

such a large group is that students sitting directly opposite me are so far away they automatically become a less participatory back-of-the-room group. To avoid this, however, I simply sit in a different chair each class.) I announced the first day of class that the readings should/would function as a catalyst -- provide the opening for our discussion. Discussion would then become the curriculum of the moment. For Greene curriculum ought to provide opportunities "for the seizing of a range of meanings by persons open to the world" (169), and for Bowles and Gintis it must be "personally liberating and politically enlightening" (287). In any case, curriculum mediated through dialogue is transformative communication in which participants make and remake their social, political, and historical realities (Shor & Freire). In Greene's words this communication "clarifies vision and pushes back the boundaries of thought. . . .founded in a recognition that the past is multivocal" (117).

In an exchange between Paolo Freire and Ira Shor, Freire says:

> Dialogue is a moment where humans meet to reflect on their reality as they make and remake it. . . .To the extent that we are communicative beings who communicate to each other as we become more able to transform our reality, we are able *to know that we know*, which is something *more* than just knowing. . . . .It is part of our historical progress in becoming human beings. (98-99)

Thus, dialogue is an enabling discourse which helps us become fully human -- awake to all the possibilities -- the kind of knowing that Greene calls *praxis*. And yet, according to

Freirean dialogics, such a discourse does not suggest that the teacher enter the classroom free of agenda or authority.

In fact, at no point am I seen as other than an authority in my classes. Yet what my students recognize is that I value their voices and their experiences. I am one authority among many. This, however, does not entirely remove positionality as we continually work to strike a balance in our delicate teacher-learner partnership. That I do not lecture, do not have all the answers, do not even believe that there is one right answer does not leave me insecure; it makes me know that I am going to continue to learn which is why I teach. Teaching is learning. What is dismantled in this approach, then, is the authoritarian-transmission model of teaching. I read the material along with my students; I come to class with my interpretations via my lens of experience, but I relearn with my students through their perspectives and their particular situations which have occurred during particular historical moments. Our knowledge is socially constructed, and it is subject to change.

Nonetheless, the nonauthoritarian approach never necessitates that I become wholly nondirective. In fact, since I do not choose to build a syllabus with my students after classes begin, I bring my own agenda into class through my syllabus of course readings and goals. That syllabus situates me both politically and philosophically and is necessary in order to facilitate the sort of confrontive readings which are capable of stirring students to "wide-awakeness." Such are the notions that

lead me to suggest openings, interruptions, arrangements which might encourage *praxis* within our classrooms. In the paragraphs which follow, I illustrate first how particular texts become confrontive as they portray frequently unexamined issues, and second I suggest how teachers might lead students to respond openly.

Situating Pedagogy in Confrontive Encounters with Literature

Dialogical education begins with students' experiences rather than teacherly abstractions and concepts. Thus when dialogue is situated in daily life experiences, moving from concreteness or common sense to academic rigor, in and of itself, affirms the anti-authoritarian approach in which dialogue is grounded (Shor & Freire). According to Judith Fetterly, because literature is so political, confrontive encounters in culturally-diverse literature can actually encourage students to pose problem-themes out of their own experiences (e.g., womens' issues, masculinity issues, issues of race, class, fat oppression, issues of sexuality, homophobia, etc.) In this instance dialogue becomes a necessary challenge not only to dominant forms of teaching but also to content based upon dominant perspectives. And in *Marxism and Literary Criticism*, Terry Eagleton reminds us that the particular viewpoint literature presents is one that reinforces a dominant view of the world.

If our literary selections focus upon contraries, then our reading may demand that we look closely at our own lives; in essence it may demand more "wide awakeness." Moreover, in "wide awakeness" there is a certain concreteness. Because it is related to being in the world, it is related to lived experiences (Schutz, 1967). However, such experiences tend to describe an interpreted reality. In other words, students reading critical essays (R. G. Kelly, "Mother was a Lady," L. J. Weitzman, "Sex-role Socialization in Picture Books for Preschool Children," M. R. Lieberman, "Some Day My Prince will Come") on the construction of sexuality/sex roles confessed having never considered that their own femininity was a social construct which perpetuated a given social order - predominantly constructed by white, middle-class males. Following that discussion with Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*, students felt a particular kinship to Edna Pontellier who describes a reality not unlike the interpreted reality of many women for whom nearly all life experiences have in some way revolved around the desire to please in a male dominated world. Responding to the sounds of her husband's impatience, Edna gives us this window:

> She would, through habit, have yielded to his desire; not with any sense of submission or obedience to his compelling wishes, but unthinkingly, as we walk, move, sit, stand, go through the daily treadmill of the life which has been portioned out to us. (79)

The situation described in these lines is not unfamiliar to women as it confronts the issue which Helene Cixous calls functioning within the "discourse of man."

Dale Spender locates a further way in which women function within a predominantly male discourse community. She notes that in many social sitations women are expected to encourage male talk at the expense of their own -- the female is "making the effort, 'drawing him out', until he chooses to take over and to 'hold the floor'" (48). Here we see Edith Wharton's (*The House of Mirth*) Lily Bart in that role as she carefully plans to charm the wealthy Percy Gryce whom she meets on her train ride to Bellomont. Lily knows that if the conversation drags she can "draw him out" by asking him questions about his Americana collection: there is "one spring that she ha[s] only to touch to set his simple machinery in motion" (61).

Edna and Lily remind us of the "ready-made" world in which we have been socialized; in both novels the lack of awakeness or deliberate living is an obvious point of conflict. Though Lily is not without guile, she is, nonetheless, a pitiful character and a victim of society. Likewise, Toni Morrison's Sethe (*Beloved*) lives in "helpless, apologetic resignation because she ha[s] no choice. . .[but] to live there all alone making do" (164). Edna, Lily, and Sethe feel victimized and powerless to change their plights.

Had they been able to understand as students may be led to do that one <u>can</u> choose, that reality <u>is</u> constructed and if it is

constructed then it may be altered, that life is not merely filled with inevitability, but that it is possible to transcend, Edna, Lily, and Sethe might have been able to resist some of the roles they were forced to play. For, in talking about the need for "some kind of tomorrow," Paul D eloquently says to Sethe, "you your best thing" (273) as Morrison leaves us with the understanding that we can recreate, reconstruct, remake our social realities.

Like Edna, Lily, and Sethe's lives, students lives are socially constructed in the perpetual legitimation of social order. According to Taxel, "both the formal and informal knowledge presented in schools contribute to the formation of. . .subjectivities: values, ideals, world view, belief systems, etc." (7). Often our sense of who we are and of our roles are taken as a given. That "giveness," what Herbert Marcuse calls "the mystifying power of the given" (72), then, becomes a subject for consideration as it is frequently responsible for feelings of victimization and powerlessness. Carol Gould also writes about giveness and the importance of demystifying "illusions that bind us to exploitation" (38).

Indeed, exploitation which creates the sense of powerlessness and victimization can be seen in Edna's suicide which both marks her *awakening* and ends the book without so much as a funeral or even explicit recognition:

> . . .it was too late; the shore was far behind her, and her strength was gone. She looked into the distance, and the old terror flamed up for an instant, then sank again.

(168-169)

Likewise, in *The House of Mirth*, Lily's suicide is compared to a small leaf fallen from a tree. And, Mrs. Ramsay's death in Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* is given little attention. We see only that her husband "stretched his arms out one dark morning," and "they remained empty" (120). Additionally, in Doris Lessing's *The Fifth Child*, Harriet bemoans the fact that life and youth have been taken away as if some "invisible substance had been leached from her; she had been drained of some ingredient that everyone took for granted" (129). Despair characterizes these texts, yet examination of such issues as hopelessness, confusion, and isolation can lead students to consider possible alternatives.

For example, the idea of choice often emerges as a transformative theme in class discussions. We make the idea of choice problematic as we uncover the risks associated with making choices. In other words, my undergraduates often feel that they have no choices -- some male in their lives, either daddy or boyfriend, helps make all their decisions, or my graduate students feel that their options are limited due to financial obligations. As choice is problematized, students further examine Edna's artist's role as she hears Mademoiselle Reisz' voice echoing "The artist must possess the courageous soul that dares and defies" (Chopin, 168). Or, they may consider the artist's <u>vision</u> of Woolf's Lily Briscoe in *To the Lighthouse*. Lily has struggled throughout the entire story to complete a

painting. She is often distracted and feels at times that she would rather be a part of "ordinary experience" than to have an artist's mind for all things. Yet, Lily is convinced she has something she must share; therefore, with great "determination not to be put off, not to be bamboozled," she works to "hold the scene" until at last upon adding the final stroke of her paint brush she can say, "I have had my vision" (185- 192).

Further, we consider with Virginia Woolf in *A Room of One's Own* the problem of women writing:

> The indifference of the world which Keats and Flaubert and other men of genius have found so hard to bear was in her case not indifference but hostility. The world did not say to her as it said to them, Write if you choose; it makes no difference to me. The world said with a guffaw, Write? What's the good of writing? Here the psychologists of Newnham and Girton might come to our help, I thought, looking again at the blank spaces on the shelves. For surely it is time that the effect of discouragement on the mind of the artist should be measured, as I have seen a dairy company measure the effect of ordianary milk and Grade A milk upon the body of the rat. (54)

Thus, it is that this limitation to the arts is part of what must be questioned, according to Greene, as a "problematic application of gender categories, at odds with our sense of what is real" (219). Such confrontive, almost inflammatory, writings become an invitation to dialogue as students focus upon changing oppressive social structures that influence their own lives. Following are some suggestions for moving students to this point.

Helping Students Respond Openly

One of the best springboards for discussion that I use is the response journal or learning log. At times it is best to leave instructions for this journal fairly open ended. However, if you do not want general entries, here are some specific suggestions for your students' response log:

1. Choose a passage from your reading that upsets/disturbs you. Write out your problem. (e.g., I don't understand why Edna (*The Awakening*) chose suicide instead of following her predilections for being an artist. Is it because. . . ?)

2. Choose a passage that made you say, "Ah ha!" Why did that section impress you? (e.g., When Lily (*To the Lighthouse*) added the final brush stroke to her painting and said ". have had my vision," I thought of Edna's irrevocable decision coupled with her moment of "awakening" because. . .)

3. Have a dialogue with yourself or with one of the characters.

4. What personal connections can you make? Does the selection remind you of something that has happened to you or a friend? (i.e., Have you had your moment of awakening?)

5. How does the writer succeed or fail?

Because journals are written primarily in order that students have a place to think through their reading -- beginning a meaning making process -- journals are not evaluated in the traditional sense. However, students often find that these writings are precursors of papers they do write for a grade.

Empowerment and Social Transformation

Sharing stories which make us truly unique and link us with characters' lives who mirror our own is the stuff of dialogue.

Its empowering nature has the potential to foster change, particularly in women's literature classes. Because as Shor challenges, "liberatory learning is a social activity which by itself remakes authority" (101), students learn that their insights can reconstruct the existing author/authority of the texts they read remaking them with social, cultural, and political relevance. This idea is close to Marcuse's notion of aesthetic transformation as the "vehicle of recognition" (72). Such tension, then, is essential in order that social transformation occur; i.e., social transformation in the form of changed views of women's roles, more authentic/nonstereotypical views of Black experience, elevating the roles of the working class, and as Bowles and Gintis suggest removing elitist "pretentions which lead to a defeatist quietism and isolation" (287).

Further, in confronting the nature of social "giveness," dialogue becomes a vehicle for knowing what we know; dialogue becomes a means to empowerment (Shor & Freire). Yet, without socially transforming existing knowledge, empowerment is meaningless. Shor and Freire assert that there is no "personal self-empowerment" bereft of the freedom to help others become free. On freedom and transformation, Maxine Greene says this:

> Freedom is the power of vision and the power to choose. It involves the capacity to assess situations in such a way that lacks can be defined, openings identified, and possibilities revealed. It is realized only when action is taken to repair the lacks, to move through the openings, to try to pursue real possibilities. (223)

And, the need for students to understand this is essential in order that empowerment and social transformation be a possiblity.

Conclusion

The writings examined here illumine life in a resistant world while authors show us their deliberate, conscious pursuit of freedom -- a freedom to have a vision and to act upon it. The literature I have suggested is confrontive and if allowed to do its work will open spaces or create interruptions in what is often taken as a given. Therefore, a content that confronts assigned realities is one step toward "knowing that we know," an important step in the direction of "wide-awakeness."

A second and equally necessary step is a pedagogy of possibility. Acknowledging the importance of women's and minorities' voices through a restructured curricula is essential if we are to meet the needs of the students who total at least 50 to 60% of the attendance in our classes. However, simply acknowledging women and minority authors is not enough. The silenced voices of our students need a space as well. In this essay I have argued for classes where students and teachers learn together, reflecting and questioning, where response/discussion becomes an authentic curriculum.

Finally, may I suggest a self-critique be extended to one last given; that is, whose purpose does our teaching serve? In other words, who stands to gain the most from what and how we are

teaching? Are we simply privileging those who are already privileged? Or, do we offer possibilities to the disenfranchised among our students? And finally, do we extend an invitation to dialogue equally?

Notes

[1] A version of this paper was presented at the College English Association Conference, Buffalo, New York, April 5-7, 1990.

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